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A Tribute to a Chinatown Icon

Norman Lau Kee was one of the pioneers of the legal profession in Chinatown. He was a grandson of Chinese immigrants, a successful academic, a World War II veteran and most significantly, was part of a very small vanguard of Asian lawyers who first provided legal representation for Chinatown residents beginning in the 1950s.

By Justice Peter Tom | December 13, 2017



Norman Lau Kee

Recently a prominent Chinese American attorney in New York City quietly passed away at the age of 90, receiving little attention outside the Asian community. However, the passing of Norman Lau Kee represents a significant historic milestone and was a major news event in the city's Chinese community.

Norman Lau Kee was one of the pioneers of the legal profession in Chinatown. He was a grandson of Chinese immigrants, a successful academic, a World War II veteran and most significantly, was part of a very small vanguard of Asian lawyers who first provided legal representation for Chinatown residents beginning in the 1950s. However, these accomplishments only tell part of the story of the lifelong achievements of Norman Lau Kee and his well-accomplished family.

Norman, born 90 years ago to Sing Kee and his wife Ina Chan-Kee, was a home-grown Chinatown native. Norman's father was a decorated veteran, having served in World War I for which he was awarded the United States' Distinguished Service Cross and France's renowned Croix de Guerre medal of honor. Both medals were presented to Norman's father for exceptional valor and bravery on the battlefield. This recognition was an extraordinary honor and accomplishment for an Asian American considering at that time there was a very small population of U.S. citizens of Chinese descent in this country due to the discriminatory Chinese Exclusion Act in effect at that time. Sing Kee was a native born U.S. citizen from Saratoga, California.

Norman was born in 1927. He attended Brooklyn Tech High School. After high school, Norman served in the Navy during World War II. He later received a degree in mechanical engineering from M.I.T. While attending school in Boston, Norman met and fell in love with the former Esther Goon. They were married shortly thereafter and raised a family of five wonderful children who gave their parents eight grandchildren and one great grandchild.

During Norman's early professional life, he gravitated to law. While still working with an engineering firm, he attended Fordham Law School at night from which he received his J.D. degree in 1955. Working full time as an engineer and studying law at night for four years undoubtedly demonstrates a strong and tenacious work ethic. Adding to his responsibilities at the time, Norman and Esther were raising four of their eventual five children.

Norman was only Chinatown's third lawyer when he hung out his shingle to open his law practice in 1956. Chinatown's residents, then as now, had many legal needs, among which immigration ranked high. So, Norman developed a specialty in immigration law. As one of few local lawyers when he started out, Norman inevitably had a significant influence on the lives of countless Chinatown families who had no knowledge of the law, and with little understanding of the English language. He provided much-needed legal advice to families and their businesses, helping them navigate through a complex and foreign legal system. At the same time, Norman helped to bring many family members of Chinatown residents into the United States during a long period of great political and cultural upheaval in China.

Not only did Norman provide invaluable legal services but he delivered great comfort to many Chinese individuals and families who otherwise would have felt vulnerable and distrustful when confronted by legal challenges and the court system. By bridging that gap, Norman fostered a cultural connection and a calming emotional dimension in service to his Chinese clients. In this respect, Norman was uniquely able to put a Chinese face on American law.

I mentioned Norman's importance in bridging different worlds. The other side of the bridge often was government. Here, too, Norman played an important role as demonstrated by his long and impressive record of distinguished public service. Among some of his many contributions: Norman served on the New York City Human Rights Commission from 1969 to 1973 and was chair of the Federal Advisory Committee of the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service from 1979 to 1980.

After 20 years at the helm of his legal practice, Norman's professional life was greatly enriched when his son Glenn, formerly an international lawyer practicing in Hong Kong and New York, joined Norman's practice in 1977. Glenn went on to achieve his own professional success while partnering with his father. Recently, Glenn became the first Asian American president of the New York State Bar Association in the 138-year history of that organization—a remarkable accomplishment. In 2010, Norman and Glenn were both recipients of the Honorable George Bundy Smith Pioneer Award conferred by the New York State Bar Association's Federal Litigation Section. In further recognition of Norman's pioneering services as an early Chinatown lawyer that extended to a lifetime of commitment, the Asian American Bar Association of New York established the Norman Lau Kee Trailblazer Award in his honor.

Norman left his indelible mark not only in the local arena but also in the international domain. In 1979, Norman and Esther created the Washington-based U.S.- Asia Institute, chartered to improve relations between the United States and Asian nations. Norman led many official delegations of the Institute to China and other Asian countries. Norman served as its chair for many years, and then as chair emeritus. The Institute is still in full operation today. In 1980, he was a member of the Madrid conference that convened to help implement the first Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Norman also was a member of the first delegation of the United States Special Trade Representative to China led by United States Ambassador Robert Strauss.

Norman's travels through U.S.- Sino diplomacy were marked by many significant steps along the way. In 1981, he organized a dinner for President Jimmy Carter at the Silver Palace restaurant in Chinatown. It was the first and only time a sitting president ever attended a function in New York City's Chinatown. A year before that, Norman and Esther were invited guests to the State Dinner for China's paramount leader, Deng Shiao Ping, in the White House. Norman's reputation and experience in U.S.-Sino relations were esteemed and appreciated by leaders in both Washington, D.C., and China.

Despite his national and international endeavors, he never lost sight of his formative local roots. In many ethnic communities, for law to be effective as a community tool, it often must be partnered with community services. Norman was on both sides of that partnership. He helped found the Chinese-American Planning Council, became a board member of the highly-regarded Hamilton Madison House and helped found and served on the Board of Trustees of Confucius Plaza. Norman also served on the board of the YMCA of Greater New York. There, his efforts and financial support helped to establish the foundation of the YMCA in Chinatown. Chinatown was given its first swimming pool in its local Y. The YMCA ultimately conferred its highest honor on Norman, inducting him into the prestigious Order of the Red Triangle.

Norman Lau Kee closed out his professional life at the age of 89 after 60 years of practicing law and becoming a local icon who also had a national and global reputation. He was a pioneer who delayed his exit long enough to see Chinatown become a bustling commercial hub, serviced by growing generations of legal professionals and even an expanding bench of Asian American judges. In the world which Norman Lau Kee inhabited for nine decades, China has grown from self isolation to an economic powerhouse, a path along which Norman traveled as he sought ways to foster a growing relationship between China and his home country, the United States. The role of Chinese Americans has become integral to fostering the often delicate U.S.-Sino relations. Norman was there at the beginning, during the early days of post-war China when his clientele largely consisted of emigrants in Chinatown. When he recently left us, it was a different world, in many ways a more promising, if still challenging world, in which Chinese Americans and Asian American lawyers necessarily will have to step forward to bridge new gaps. I hope that Norman was able to look back on his long life and see what we see now: a local lawyer who almost alone at the

beginning provided invaluable service to his community, went both national and global into politics and diplomacy, and in doing so helped channel the course of countless peoples' lives and our country's history in a constructive and positive way.

To complete the picture of Norman's illustrious career, one must sketch in the personal attributes of a man who personified the Confucian analects of hard work, dignified demeanor, high ethical standards and a gracious and respectful character. It is appropriate to paraphrase Confucius in the recognition of Norman Lau Kee. Confucius set forth five things that constitute perfect virtue. They are: gravity, magnanimity, earnestness, sincerity and kindness. These values perfectly describe Norman Lau Kee whose work touched so many lives in a positive and beneficial way.

Webster's dictionary defines "pioneer" as one who "opens or prepares for others to follow." Norman Lau Kee was one of the earliest Asian American lawyers and the last of that generation in New York, setting an exemplary standard for succeeding generations of young Asian American lawyers. He was a true pioneer of the highest order.

Norman has provided the Asian community with the template upon which succeeding generations can follow and in turn provide leadership to yet younger generations. Norman has left an indelible mark on all who were fortunate to have known him. I gratefully count myself among those family members and friends.

Justice Peter Tom is a senior justice on the Supreme Court, Appellate Division, First Department.

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